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SUBJECT: PARLIAMENT APPROVES BULGARIAN MILITARY DEPLOYMENT
TO CAMP ASHRAF

¶1. (SBU) Bulgaria's ruling three-party coalition won parliamentary approval February 22 to send 155 Bulgarian military personnel to Camp Ashraf, Iraq. The vote was 151 to 14 with one abstention. This decision clears the final hurdle in the GOB's political approval process for the mission and highlights the ruling coalition's determination to follow through on a controversial foreign policy initiative that has limited public support. According to Defense Minister Veselin Bliznakov, the unit is expected to deploy by late March. As expected, the ultra-nationalist Ataka party criticized the proposal to send Bulgarian troops back to Iraq but failed to make a dent in the Government's solid majority.

¶2. (SBU) While supporting the Camp Ashraf mission, the center-right Union for Democratic Forces used the debate to ridicule the Bulgarian Socialist Party for its campaign pledge to immediately withdraw Bulgarian troops from Iraq, if elected. Ataka MPs first tried to postpone the vote by calling for a quorum count. After the count, Ataka MPs questioned the humanitarian nature of the mission and accused the government of hiding information and involving Bulgaria in "a bloody adventure." Petar Beron, also from Ataka, said the Ashraf mission is a "shameful operation" and that the Iraqi regime is "a marionette." Former PM and leader of the opposition Democrats for Strong Bulgaria, Ivan Kostov, questioned whether the mission is humanitarian, and asserted that a parliamentary decision was not needed to send forces on a humanitarian mission.

¶3. (SBU) MPs from the ruling coalition defended the mission, which has been presented as a primarily humanitarian mission in GOB public statements, stressing that Bulgaria must be a reliable partner and member of the coalition in Iraq. Yunal Lyutfi, an MP from the ethnic Turkish Movement for Rights and Freedom, responded to Ataka's criticism by stressing the need for Bulgaria to be "consistent in its foreign policy."

¶4. (SBU) The vote ends a painful five-month deliberation process for the GOB, moved forward by frequent U.S. advocacy. In the end, the GOB decided, as PM Stanishev has frequently said, that continued involvement in Iraq remains in Bulgaria's national interest.

BEYRLE